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NASCAR's new tack on tech

By Larry Stewart

Los Angeles Times

Published November 19, 2002

Normally, one wouldn't think the high-tech navigation system used in competitive sailing would have anything to do with **NASCAR** stock car racing.

But there is a connection.

In yachting, a satellite Global Positioning System, or GPS, is used to determine a boat's position and performance, the drift of the current. This information allows the navigator to compute the fastest course.

In **NASCAR**, the same tracking system is used in TV coverage to give viewers each car's position, its speed and how many seconds it is behind the leader.

Much of that technology is provided by Sportvision of Mountain View, Calif., a company co-founded by world-class yachting navigator Stan Honey.

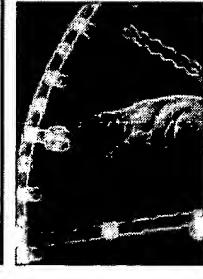
Sportvision also provides the yellow first-down line used on football telecasts by Fox, ABC and ESPN, and the K-Zone technology ESPN used on baseball telecasts this season to track balls and strikes.

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Honey and Bill Squadron founded Sportvision in 1998, while working for Rupert Murdoch's News Corp.

Honey, with a background in electrical engineering, is the brains behind the technology. Squadron, who has a law degree, is more in tune with the business side.

Special reports

Much of the technology sprang from Honey's love of sailing, his skills as a navigator and his familiarity with GPS. He initially excelled as a navigator in the age of charts and sextants, then reestablished himself in the era of satellite weather information and GPS.

He has been the navigator for Roy Disney's several record-setting races on the 75-foot maxi sled, Pyewacket, primarily in the Transpac race from Los Angeles to Hawaii, and the roundtrip between Bermuda and Newport, R.I.

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In 1996, Honey, who grew up in San Marino, was the executive vice president for technology at News Corp. when David Hill, creative chairman of Fox Sports, came to him and asked if there might be a way to help TV viewers follow a hockey puck. Honey came up with the idea for Fox Trax and supervised its development. It wasn't as well received as the first-down line or K-Zone, but a new technical form was born.

One of Sportvision's newest toys is a super Telestrator TNT has just begun using on NBA telecasts. It allows announcers to draw on the screen without drawing on the players. It works on the same principles as the first-down line.

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Squadron was at Staples Center when TNT televised the Lakers' season opener against San Antonio. He gave a reporter a behind-the-scenes tour and demonstrated how a line can be drawn or placed on a screen and made to appear as though it were there naturally.

The key is the color coding. The yellow first-down line appears only on the exact shade of green of the stadium's grass. It doesn't appear on the players, creating an illusion that it runs beneath the players.

"We had a little trouble in the beginning," Squadron said. "It was picking up the green in Green Bay Packer jerseys and Philadelphia Eagle jerseys, and a few times the line went across the players."

That's why the color has to be exact.

These days, the line looks so good, people have been fooled into thinking it exists.

"We've had to explain that the line is not on the field," Honey said. "We have to explain it's virtual imaging."

Squadron said the technology is more advanced in **NASCAR** than any other sport.

"That's because we can put a 10-pound box in a race car," he said. "We can't put one on a human being."

NASCAR is thrilled with what Sportvision has done for stock car racing.

"The star of the show is the **in-car camera**," said Jeffrey Pollack, the managing director of broadcasting and new media for **NASCAR**. "But the data and graphics from Sportvision provide a nice supporting cast."

In-car cameras have been around since 1979, when CBS televised the Daytona 500 for the first time. Benny Parsons, now an NBC commentator, allowed his car to be equipped with an 80-pound camera. These days, cars have three cameras, weighing a total of 18 pounds.

"I don't know any other sport that makes as much use of Sportvision's technology as **NASCAR**," Pollack said. "They're part of our network telecasts, part of **nascar.com** and part of our In-Car on In Demand pay package."

In-Car on In Demand, available only on digital cable, is a seven-channel package that offers fans the opportunity to follow their favorite driver's every move on a dedicated channel.

It's the kind of technology that the NFL is looking at for its Sunday Ticket pay package -- offering one game on several channels with various camera angles.

But for now, when it comes to technology in sports television, **NASCAR** is the leader.

Average number of *NASCAR* viewers per race

In 2000: CBS/ABC/NBC: 7.8 million

In 2001: Fox/NBC-TNT: 8.3 million

In 2002: Fox/NBC-TNT: 8.5 million

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